

Moebius

Volume 2

Issue 1 *The Muse & Modern Culture*

Article 8

4-1-2004

Introduction to the Interviews

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Recommended Citation

Wenzl, Michael (2004) "Introduction to the Interviews," *Moebius*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/moebius/vol2/iss1/8>

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INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERVIEWS

Michael Wenzl, Professor of English


The Muses, nine in number, are said to have visited Hesiod as he was tending his flocks and told him that they know how to speak of false events as though they were true, but they also know how to speak the truth.

Hesiod is credited with telling the story detailing the birth of the Muses in his *Theogony*. They are the offspring of Zeus and Mnemosyne (Memory), and have always been considered as personifications of inspiration and beneficence. It was always said that the man whom the Muses love is blessed; they relieve humans of troubles and sorrows through song.

Some scholars believe that the Muses are connected with idea of inspiration as it was understood in cultures before the invention of writing. In these cultures, memory was extremely important, the primary means through which cultural history and information was preserved and passed on. Poets commonly invoked the Muses and asked that they be worthy of the tale they were about to tell (from memory). Hence, Homer begins *The Odyssey*:

*Sing in me Muse, and through me tell the story
of that man skilled in all ways of contending,
the wanderer, harried for years on end,
after he plundered the stronghold
on the proud height of Troy.¹*

Assessing the relationship of the Muses to modern culture presents a different problem. The classical concept of the Muses presupposes a set of conditions long ago forgotten by most. The “Waste Land” may not be the most fertile ground for the Muses to thrive. And events have taught us all to be wary of those who claim to have divine connections. Still, I would contend that the Muses, though not often mentioned, still conspire to be with us, helping us to preserve our culture and identity. Though they are no longer invoked in the traditional way, they continue to be worshipped:

*To turn experience into speech—that is,
to classify, to categorize, to conceptualize
to grammarize, to syntactify it—is always a
betrayal of experience, a falsification of it;
but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at
all, and only in so dealing with it did I ever
feel a man, alive and kicking.²* 

Notes

1. Homer, *The Odyssey*.
2. John Barth, *End of the Road* (Garden City, NY: Double Day, 1967).